

April 1916

Last month two British soldiers were out in 'No Man's Land' with orders to log the enemy's activity. They had to get as close as possible to the enemy and even though the men hugged the lay of the land they were soon spotted, thus attracting intense enemy fire. Bullets and shrapnel ripped through the air and both men were badly wounded. The two should have withdrawn to safety and lived to fight another day. However they elected to press forward, facing almost certain death, before eventually completing their mission and reporting their findings to their superiors. Only afterwards did they seek medical attention.

Today back in Brandon, Eliza Docking, like all Brandon mothers, has experienced the lows of seeing a son go off to war. Her son Robert volunteered at the start, twenty months ago, and joined his older brother, who is a career soldier, in fighting the enemy. Of course both regularly write home and as long as they do so then Eliza knows they are relatively safe. Last month, Robert enclosed a communication inside one of his letters. It read, "*General Scott is glad to be able to inform you that you have been awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for gallantry in the field, and he offers his hearty congratulations.*" This was later confirmed on page twelve of the London Gazette. Then the local media got to hear this news and both the Bury Free Press and Thetford and Watton Times reported on Robert's heroism. This is one of the highest awards a soldier in the ranks can receive, only bettered by the Victoria Cross. Twenty-one year old Robert was one of those two brave soldiers injured while spying on the enemy last month.

So today Eliza is on a high, and those lows are behind her, but there is another reason for her elation because today Eliza knows her son is completely safe. She knows this because has been reunited with him. You see Robert, who was shot through the forearm while spying on the enemy, has been given seven days leave and is now back in the family home, at 97 Thetford Road. He has not returned alone and has been accompanied by two Brandon lads from his unit, Herbert Edwards and Edgar Randall. Herbert has headed along London Road to spend the week with his family at number 86. His parents lost their other son in the war last October, which was just after they lost a young daughter to illness, so I do not need to tell you what Herbert's return means to them. Harriet Randall, further up at number 201, lost her eldest son in Gallipoli last year, then suffered a breakdown, so we cannot even imagine how emotional she was at seeing her son Edgar walk through the door.

At the end of the week the lads will have to leave their family's sanctuary and return to the war. Those will be the toughest goodbyes. Eliza knows Robert will not always be out of harm's way, and no medal would ever replace her son if he were killed. What she does not know is that the information her son gathered will help plan an attack on the Somme, to take place in July. On that sunny July day, while she is working in a fur factory, her son and dozens of other Brandon lads like him, will be thrown onto German machine guns with devastating affect.